Suicide Terrorism as Strategy: Case Studies of Hamas and the Kurdistan Workers Party

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by Ali Wyne

Introduction

Why is it that certain terrorist organizations employ suicide terrorism to advance their objectives, while others do not? In order to answer this question, I will examine why Hamas, the central terrorist organization operating within the Occupied Territories, has gradually escalated its employment of suicide terrorism; and why the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), a separatist group operating in Turkey, gradually abandoned it as a component of its broader strategy. I will discuss the activities of these groups within the context of two competing explanations of suicide terrorism: those which focus on religious motivations, and those which focus on strategic motivations. I argue that while the first set of explanations is meritorious in some instances, the latter set of explanations is much more broadly applicable, and, as such, more legitimate.

Suicide Terrorism as Strategy

Hamas' official charter, made public on August 18, 1988, articulates a harrowing commitment to the complete destruction of Israel: "Israel will exist and will continue to exist until Islam will obliterate it, just as it obliterated others before it."[1] The charter's most striking features lie not in its body, but, rather, in its opening and closing statements. The document begins "In The Name Of The Most Merciful Allah," and concludes deferentially—"The last of our prayers will be praise to Allah, the Master of the Universe."[2] Indeed, there is an undeniable religiosity to this document, one whose invocations of Islamic principles is still widely associated with Hamas and its supporters. It should be apparent, however, that Hamas' charter is not reflective of the Holy Qu'ran, but rather is replete with egregious distortions of select statements contained therein and fallacious renditions of Islamic principles.

Hamas' ultimate objectives are, and always have been religious. Imad Saluji, once the head of Hamas' political wing, argues that "Palestine [cannot be] completely free until it is an Islamic State."[3] Saluji's pronouncement is remarkably similar to other statements of Hamas' objectives. While still a student at al-Azhar University in Cairo, Sheikh Ahmed Yassin—the founder of Hamas—came to believe that Palestine was "consecrated for future Muslim generations until Judgment Day."[4] His views became decidedly more militant with the passing of time: following

the signature of the Oslo Accords in September 1993, he condemned the peace process as a failed "substitute for jihad and resistance."[5]

Hamas' ultimate ambition is to establish and impose an Islamic state which would encompass all of Palestine. However, the central tactic which Hamas has used to advance that objective—suicide terrorism—is much more suitably attributed to pragmatic considerations than to religious principles. Even many noted scholars who accord religion considerable explanatory power have conceded this point. Consider the words of an Israeli Professor of Philosophy at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem: "While the language used by the bombers and their organizations is always distinctly Islamic, the motives of the bombers are much more complicated, and some mention more than one motive for their act."[6]

The two central explanations of suicide terrorism which oppose mine fail to make this crucial distinction. The first of these explanations, simply stated, is that "people become suicide bombers because of religious principles."[7] Such a posture, in addition to being overly simplistic, belies the reality that the leading practitioner of suicide terrorism is a secular, nationalist group in Sri Lanka, the Liberation Tamil Tigers of Eelam.[8] The second, and equally prominent of these explanations is that perpetrators of suicide terrorism suffer from some psychological disturbance—that, in effect, they are "deranged."[9] However, numerous reputable studies have firmly dispelled this notion.[10] Indeed, while these two explanations of suicide terrorism have different emphases, they both, mistakenly, ignore the geopolitical circumstances which give rise to this practice. It is facile to ascribe suicide bombing to irrationality: the act of martyring oneself to murder innocents is unconscionably gruesome and barbaric. However, as I have noted above, and continue to illustrate below, analyses which focus on the act of suicide terrorism alone are woefully insufficient.

Hamas has employed suicide terrorism not because this tactic is grounded in Islamic principles or depraved psychology, but, rather, because it is one of the most strategically utilitarian forms of asymmetric warfare. By any reasonable measure, Israel would annihilate Hamas were the two to engage in conventional military warfare. With redoubtable technological prowess; anywhere between 100 and 200 nuclear warheads; and, now, even a submarine-based atomic arms capability, it is certainly the "military powerhouse of the Middle East."[11] It is within this framework that Ramadan Shalah, Hamas' secretary general, supplies the rationale for suicide bombing: "Our enemy possesses the most sophisticated weapons in the world and its army is trained to a very high standard…We have nothing with which to repel the killing and thuggery against us except the weapon of martyrdom. It is easy and costs us only our lives…human bombs cannot be defeated, not even by nuclear bombs."[12]

Between April 1993 and September 2000, Hamas conducted 27 suicide attacks, resulting in 120 of the 290 fatalities which Israel sustained at the hands of Palestinian terrorist organizations; in between September 2000 and November 2004, Hamas conducted 112 suicide attacks, resulting in 474 of the 918 fatalities which Israel sustained at the hands of Palestinian terrorist organizations.[13] Note that during this second, shorter time period, Hamas caused four times as many Israeli casualties; furthermore, the proportion of Israeli casualties of terrorism resulting from Hamas' attacks grew by approximately 11 percent. More broadly, developments since April 1993 have affirmed the "coercive effectiveness" of suicide terrorism: by employing this tactic, Hamas compelled Israeli forces to withdraw from Gaza in 1994 and from the West Bank in 1995.[14] Ten years later, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's decision to unilaterally evacuate all Jewish residents of the Gaza Strip is seen as yet another strategic "victory for Palestinian resistance."[15]

It is natural to ask why Islamist terrorist groups such as Hamas have employed suicide terrorism more than their secular counterparts, such as the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP). The clearest explanation is that the memberships of and bases of support for these groups are negligible compared to those, respectively, of and for Hamas. The PFLP, for example, is believed to have a static pool of approximately 800 members, whereas Hamas is known to

have a dynamic membership which, at any one time, numbers in the tens of thousands.[16] As such, each member of Hamas is far more dispensable, and can be readily replaced with a willing recruit. Each member of PFLP is, by comparison, much more crucial to the organization's viability, and, as such, far less expendable. The next logical question to ask, then, is why Hamas has this wider base of support. It has, more than any other Palestinian terrorist organization, helped to extract significant territorial concessions from Israel, thereby cementing its reputation among the Palestinian people as a committed, successful agent of change. Furthermore, "[Hamas] has created a community that has social services, schools, and healthcare, while maintaining military wings that carry out suicide bombings. Other Palestinian terrorist groups simply conduct violence without understanding or coordinating the social needs of the population they claim to defend."[17] What the above analysis makes clear is that merely invoking (or perverting) Islamic principles could never have endeared Hamas to the Palestinian population or legitimized its practice of suicide bombing.

It should be noted that the Palestinian public has not always actively supported Hamas' practice of suicide bombing. Prior to Autumn 2000, Palestinian support for this practice never surpassed 33 percent.[18] Support for suicide terrorism rose dramatically thereafter, as the peace process disintegrated and compounded domestic frustration: "Public opinion polls showed a steady increase in support for martyrdom operations as Palestinian hopes for a peaceful future plummeted… Violence now resonates with the larger population because of some of the Sharon government's counterterror tactics."[19] Hamas' escalating use of suicide bombings owed not to religious principles, but rather to an important strategic consideration: that Palestinians are more likely to espouse this tactic in times of despair.

Furthermore, suicide bombing, in addition to entailing closely related economic and strategic benefits for Hamas, minimizes the costs which it incurs in its armed struggle against Israel. On average, it only costs Hamas $150 to launch a suicide attack.[20] By contrast, the economic costs which Israel has sustained as a result of suicide terrorism—the most recent phases of which are known as the "Intifada"—have been proportionally much greater:

The Bank of Israel estimates the damage to the Israeli economy from just one year of Intifada— the year 2002—at 3.8% of GDP. Following its conceptual framework and assuming the Intifada had ended by the end of year 2000, the accumulated three-year loss is enormous: in the range of 90 billion NIS—22 billion dollars or one-fifth of one years' gross domestic product…The absolute number of poor people, since the Intifada started, increased by 22%. Today one in five Israelis is poor. The number of poor children rose by 30%. Almost one in three children in Israel now lives in a poor family.[21]

The economic costs of suicide terrorism are compounded by equally, if not more important political ramifications. Some historical context is appropriate here. The motivation behind Hamas' practice of suicide terrorism can be traced back to September 1972, when members of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) massacred 11 Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympics. Intuition and basic morality would suggest that such barbarity would be met with widespread censure; it was, perversely enough, rewarded. In November 1972, the United Nations affirmed the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people, and granted the PLO observer status. By murdering Israeli athletes in such a dramatic and horrifying manner, the PLO succeeded in focusing widespread international attention on the plight of the Palestinian people, and in so doing, advanced the cause of Palestinian nationalism. In this sense, "many in [Yasir] Arafat's entourage regarded terror as effective and the murderous attack on the Israeli compound in Munich as a triumph."[22] Today, Hamas seeks not to elicit international support for Palestinian nationalism, which already abounds, but rather to legitimize the view that Israel is a repressive state, intent on crushing the spirit of the Palestinian people. Quite often, Israel's responses to suicide bombings have, rightly or wrongly, lent considerable credence to this perception. Israel's incursion into the Jenin refugee camp in April 2002, and its ongoing construction of a "security fence" within the Occupied Territories are two of the clearer affirmations of this contention.

The same basic conclusions which I have derived above result when one analyzes the PKK's use of suicide terrorism. Here, however, the religious explanation is even more tenuous, whereas at least it had some ability to explain Hamas' ultimate objectives. Indeed, there is virtually no mention of religious motivations in commonly cited descriptions of the PKK's origins and activities. Dr. Ariel Merari, Senior Fellow at the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at Harvard University, made the following statement on this subject:

The Kurdish PKK, the Kurdish Labor Party, is a Marxist party. They are certainly not religious. And they have also carried out suicide terrorist attacks. Religiosity and religious motivation, and the belief in Paradise are not a must. Actually, in many cases terrorists have carried out suicide attacks out of nationalist motivation or in the name at least of nationalist motivation, patriotic motivation as they see it, or any other motivating force that is non-religious.[23]

The Economist affirmed this notion in a recent editorial: "The Kurdish PKK, which has deployed suicide bombers in its quests for Kurdish autonomy and for the release of its captured leader, Abdullah Ocalan, is influenced less by Islam than by Marxist-Leninism."[24] One could reasonably argue that these appraisals of the PKK's character are understated, because the PKK is not accurately described as insouciant towards Islam, but rather, as opposed to it: one study notes its fervently "antireligious rhetoric and violence."[25]

The fledging organization garnered increasing popular support after a right-wing military junta seized power on September 12, 1980. The new government, led by General Kenan Evren, abolished Turkey's existing constitution, sanctioned the torture of political detainees, and, more broadly, adopted a series of repressive measures which entrenched its autocracy.[26] In light of this abrupt departure from quasi-democratic rule to near authoritarian governance, the PKK gained widespread legitimacy and crucial indigenous support: indeed, it was this broad base of domestic support that, in large part, allowed the PKK to finance a sophisticated, multifaceted insurgency against the Turkish government:

From 1984 the PKK became a force to be reckoned with, a genuine guerrilla movement significantly supported by ordinary Kurdish peasants. What began as a nuisance to the Turkish state grew over the 1980s into a large-scale civil war. By 1990, some 300,000 troops were deployed in the southeast and an enormous amount of the national budget (with reports ranging from 25 to 40 percent) was going to support police and military operations there. In 1992, the government began a policy of forcibly evacuating villages in order to deprive the PKK of its popular support.[27]

The PKK's decision to adopt suicide terrorism came during 1996, as the Turkish government bolstered its possession of conventional armaments and significantly weakened the organization. That year, Turkey initiated a massive, $31 billion program to modernize its military over the course of the next eight years, beginning with a purchase of 145 Cobra attack helicopters.[28] The following year, it concluded a ten-week siege of PKK sanctuaries, known as "Operation Hammer," not only killing close to 3,000 of its operatives, but also, in the process, destroying much of its economic infrastructure. Setbacks such as these "had an adverse effect on the morale of its members…the organization was seeking an effective means to reverse this trend and to boost the morale of its fighters. Suicide missions were therefore chosen as a consolidating tool."[29] More broadly, the PKK adopted suicide terrorism because it believed that such an anomalistic practice would compel Turkey to grant autonomy to its Kurdish inhabitants.[30]

The PKK only carried out a total of 21 suicide attacks, but, given the opportunity, would likely have carried out more. Indeed, during a 1997 interview, the leader of the PKK, Abdullah Ocalan, cited suicide terrorism as an integral component of the organization's strategy.[31] Why then, did it abandon suicide terrorism after carrying out a comparatively small number of attacks? Turkey launched aggressive counterinsurgency campaigns, many of which were far more destructive and pitiless than Israel's, and both Turkish and Israeli government operations resulted in considerable

civilian casualties. However, unlike Israel's, Turkey's counterterrorism operations dually targeted PKK militants and provided assistance to innocent civilians enmeshed in the crossfire:

…the Turkish military hit the rebels hard, crushing the PKK, closing down international support for them and eventually arresting its leader. But the Army directed its fire at the rebels and not the surrounding population. In fact, the Turks worked very hard to win over the Kurds, creating stable governing structures for them, befriending them and putting forward social-welfare programs—to improve agriculture and women's education, for example. The Turkish government made a massive investment (totaling well over $32 billion) in the Kurdish southeast. On a per capita basis, it has invested more in the Kurdish region than in any other part of Turkey.[32]

Indeed, the PKK was forced to give up suicide terrorism as a tactic of warfare against the Turkish government, in large measure because the very individuals upon whom it crucially relied for support—Turkish Kurds—"repudiated suicide terror when it was used by the PKK in 1996."[33]

In juxtaposing Hamas' expanded use of suicide terrorism with the PKK's eventual abandonment of this tactic, it becomes clear that the motivations behind employing it are based far more on strategic considerations than religious tactics. Those individuals who perpetrate suicide terrorism are not necessarily religious fanatics or depraved neurotics, as is commonly believed, but are, rather, pragmatic strategists. Reasonable individuals may very well disagree on just how governments such as those in Iraq and Israel should defeat this resurgent phenomenon. There is little doubt, however, that to brand suicide bombers as religious fanatics, among other convenient labels, is to condemn any such strategy to failure.

About the Author

Ali Wyne is a student at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), where he is working towards a double major in Management and Political Science, with a minor in Economics. He is author of "The Revolution in Global Communications and the Challenges that it Poses to American Foreign Policy," presented to former Dean of Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government, Joseph S. Nye, Jr. (February 18, 2004); "Deterring Democracy in Iraq," *The Tech* 124, No. 40 (September 28, 2004); "Nationalism in Vietnam and Iraq," *The Modern Tribune* (January 17, 2005); and "The Case Against Invading Iran," *The Modern Tribune* (February 2, 2005). He is co-author with Zaahira Wyne of "American power lags American fairness overseas," *The Free Lance-Star* (September 14, 2003).

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